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## A Report of the Committee on A Study of the Teaching of American Literature

By LIESETTE J. McHARRY, Chairman  
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Just one year ago the Illinois Association of Teachers of English named a committee and set aside a sum of money to enable that committee to investigate the extent to which the teaching of American literature in the high schools of Illinois is contributing to the growth of high school youth in American ideals. The findings of this state committee are to be submitted to the Curriculum Commission of the National Council of Teachers of English, which is presently inaugurating a nation-wide study of the curriculum in English at all levels of instruction from the pre-school through the university.

The first step taken by the state committee was the preparation and distribution of a questionnaire designed to give a general picture of the teaching of American literature in Illinois high schools. The questionnaire was returned by 500 schools out of approximately 800 schools to which it was mailed. 38 questionnaires were returned from schools enrolling 50 or less students; 96, from those enrolling 51-100; 148, from those enrolling 101-200; 54, from those enrolling 201-300; 65, from those enrolling 301-500; 27, from those enrolling 501-750; 19, from those enrolling 751-1000; and 53 from those enrolling 1001 and over. It is interesting to note that the largest number of schools answering the questionnaire was in the group of 101-200 enrollment. And yet the 19 schools from the group of 751-1000 enrollment were undoubtedly serving far more students than the 101-200 enrollment group.

The summary report made from the questionnaires returned reveals a number of interesting data. As many as 216 of the 500 schools reporting require 3 rather than 4 years of English, but in each of the enrollment groups the larger number of schools require 4 years of English. The 11th grade is the popular level for teaching American Literature as a course, while the 12th grade holds second place. While 15 schools reported the teaching of American literature at no grade level, a number of schools offered the information that their English courses (at all levels) included selections from American literature. Only 58 of the 500 schools reporting listed American literature as not required for graduation, while 20 listed the course as college preparatory only.

Other data are related to the *teaching* of American literature in the 500 schools studied. While a number of the schools reported more than one organizational approach to the teaching of American literature, 271 are using the chronological or literary-period approach; 202 reported using the type-of-literature approach; 36 mentioned organization by great writers; 55 included organization by themes; 22 included regional approach; and 19 schools said they were organizing American literature courses about problems of America and her people. Five aims were listed in the questionnaire, and most schools did check more than one aim. The aim which received the highest number of checks, 272, was "Understanding and enjoyment of good writing produced by American writers." The aim receiving the second rating, 187 checks, was "Acquaintance with the country and the way of life and its people"; the aim receiving the third rating, 120 checks, was "Acquaintance with the story of American literature"; the aim in fourth rating, 116 checks, was "Development of an understanding of the ideas, ideals, and concepts that have produced the America of today"; the aim in fifth and final rating, 16 checks, was "Improvement of intercultural relations."

Students purchase their own texts in 250 of the 500 schools studied, while the rental system operates in 192 of the schools.

The terms used to evaluate the use of library materials were too relative to give results of any marked degree of reliability. However, 178 schools reported using library materials "extensively"; 264 used them "occasionally"; 20 used them "rarely"; and apparently 38 schools were not using library materials.

The possibility of combining the data presented in this report into a comparatively general picture of the teaching of American literature in the high schools of Illinois depends entirely upon the

extent to which the 500 schools studied are representative of the schools of the state in this particular regard. The present trend which these data do outline is in the direction of a required course in American literature, taught at the 11th grade level from the chronological approach, and with "Understanding and enjoyment of good writing produced by American writers" as the chief aim. This is the very brief statement of findings made up to the present time. It would seem that this simply stated trend does not suggest any weighty contribution made by the teaching of American literature to the *growth of high school youth in American ideals*, but the excellent beginnings in this growth as recorded in the questionnaire are most encouraging.

These findings are directing the committee into additional and related problems: (1) What are the concepts of Americanism, the ideals, the beliefs, that English teachers would incorporate into their lists of aims? (2) How can the Illinois Association be made cognizant of the excellent beginnings that are being made by English teachers in Illinois in contributing to the growth of youth in these ideals? (3) How can these beginnings be extended into something of an experimental project?

The committee has laid plans to find answers for these questions. They have prepared a second questionnaire, which has been sent to teachers of high school English in Illinois, asking that the latter make statements of American ideals. The replies to this should answer the first question. The committee has planned, as it promised at the 1946 meeting of the Illinois Association, to begin a program of visitation to schools which have made reports of interesting progress toward the goal of growth in American ideals and also to schools which would like to invite members of the committee to make visitations. In this way the committee will be able to gather data on course aims, patterns, materials, and classroom procedures. The findings will be distributed ultimately to the high schools of the state. The third phase of the plan made by the committee must necessarily be on a voluntary basis. The committee invites schools that are interested to volunteer to teach their American literature course on an experimental basis in accord with the recommendations of this committee. This experimental phase of the study of the teaching of American literature will be preceded by a careful statement of criteria for evaluating the aims, procedures, and content recommended.

At the meeting of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English held in Urbana on October 25, 1947, the Executive Committee of the Association voted to continue to sponsor the Committee on a



Study of the Teaching of American Literature. This report for the year 1946-1947 was made by the committee at the general session of the October, 1947, meeting.

*Committee members:*

Miss Ellen Burkhart  
Miss Mary Carlson  
Miss Isabel Hoover  
Miss Liesette J. McHarry, Chairman  
Miss Mary Miller  
Sister Mary Rosaleen  
Mrs. Zada Templeton  
Mr. W. R. Wood

# Criteria for Selecting a High School Textbook in American Literature<sup>1</sup>

By WILLIAM R. WOOD  
Evanston High School

The ideal textbook in American literature for any high school class is the one that provides the materials essential for the teacher to accomplish the goal of instruction previously determined for that class. Of necessity these goals vary from community to community, from class to class, and from year to year. In a core class, perhaps, specific goals for any pupil group may be discovered, as the group decides, during the year, since, in general, such experimental classes are concerned primarily with putting into daily action a *method* of study that presumably will lead to maximum individual self development. Inasmuch as the materials of instruction for such classes are selected by the individual pupil from day to day, and are normally considered of purely secondary importance, the suggestions presented herewith are limited to the typical classroom situation wherein the scope and the sequence of materials are largely determined by the teaching staff and the school administration. In such situations the teacher plays a major role and is largely responsible for the success or failure of his group.

It is tremendously important, then, that the teacher of American literature be completely familiar with the over-all objectives of secondary education in his community and with the part his course assumes in the total effort to achieve these goals. Armed with both essential information and intelligent convictions, he is ready to proceed with the task of selecting a suitable textbook.

In studying a possible choice, the teacher may first dispose of three items of secondary consideration: the publishing company, the editorial staff, and the authors represented by selections included. Almost without exception good textbooks are published only by long-established, reputable textbook firms. Occasionally a newcomer invades the field and should be given a hearing. Textbooks published by private individuals, however, are to be avoided since they are ordinarily too specialized for general distribution and use. It should be remembered that publishing companies, even

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<sup>1</sup> A supplement to the 1947 Report of the Committee on a Study of the Teaching of American Literature.

those with general lists, are inclined to specialize in a particular field. One company features textbooks in home economics, another specializes in technical books, a third concentrates on science. The products of such specialization should always be carefully considered since normally they will rate among the best in the particular field. Among the leaders in high school English during the past ten years the following must be listed: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Ginn and Company, Scott, Foresman Company, D. C. Heath and Company, J. B. Lippincott and Company, Henry Holt and Company, Macmillan Company, L. W. Singer Company, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Harper and Brothers, and Scribner's Sons. To the best of our knowledge, not one of these companies has published an outstanding high school textbook in American literature—nor, again, to the best of our knowledge, has any other company or individual. The territory is certainly wide open for development.

The editors of modern textbooks for high schools are most frequently found among experienced high school teachers. The day of dependence upon college professors for textbook production is past. The reputation of the school in which the editor teaches is of more significance than the name of a great research scholar in estimating the possible value of a textbook for the high school classroom.

The authors represented by selections in the textbook are of less importance than what they have to say that is of significance for young people living today and planning for tomorrow. Too frequently the study of American literature follows an arrangement either by chronological literary periods or by literary types. The first quickly degenerates into a history course about famous names in American literature, while the second inevitably tends to emphasize form at the expense of content. Both the types approach and the chronological approach are relatively meaningless at the secondary school level. Incidental study of form and of quality of writing is of value, however, as an aid to the understanding of the content and to the development of discrimination in taste.

The most important items to consider in the selection of an American literature textbook for high school use are the editor's statement of purpose as set forth in the preface, or introduction, or foreword and the success with which he has been able to carry out this purpose in his choice, arrangement, and presentation of materials. If a book is to be an effective teaching instrument, it must have *purposeful organization*. The various units must be coordinated parts of the whole pattern, with each separate unit



constituting a consistent whole within itself. *Thought continuity* from unit to unit and from selection to selection within a unit is ordinarily sacrificed completely if the arrangement is by literary types.

There should be noticeable progression from the less to the more difficult concepts and modes of expression within each unit and from unit to unit. This is an important principle, basic to the pupils' intellectual growth, that is too often ignored in textbook making. The old chronological approach, for example, usually put the selections that were hardest to read and to understand in the first unit of work. Only the hardiest variety of pupils survived the ordeal.

To reach the great variety of interests and tastes of a typical high school class, the textbook maker must draw his materials from the widest possible range and scope. Obviously a good group of selections from American literature can be made only from the works of a broad list of first-rate writers. In choosing materials, the teacher needs to exercise care to insure a *balance* between the old and established and the new and controversial. Normally, except in the case of a novelette, a long narrative poem, or a full-length play, it is best to present different literary types in each unit.

In all cases, the most important matter is the idea that is being developed in the unit. Variety in the form in which various aspects of the idea are presented can oftentimes strengthen understanding. Wherever possible, a *variety in points of view* concerning the same concept, problem, or situation, should be brought into juxtaposition for study and consideration. To this end it is advisable, as often as possible, to present the viewpoints of authors from various countries and from different social and economic levels on topics in which they have a common interest.

Our course in American literature then takes on a new and larger significance as a study of AMERICA IN LITERATURE. Perhaps for the younger or the less gifted pupil the course should be concerned chiefly with the extension of acquaintanceship with America—the land and the people, the geographical appearance of the land, the customs, traditions, folk-lore, and history of the people. For the mature and the capable pupil, however, *the emphasis could well be upon the meaning of America and Americanism*. What is an American? How does he differ from the native sons of other lands? In what respects is he similar to them, especially in his beliefs and in his actions? What do others think of him as an individual? Of his accomplishments and of his limitations? How should the American pupils evaluate these criticisms? What must

Americans do if America is to continue to progress? To answer these questions intelligently, we need to know what we have said about ourselves as well as what other people have said about us. Our study should be both informative and inspirational. Moreover, it should provide opportunity for positive action. There should be daily occasion for oral and written discussion to stimulate thinking, to improve communication, and to develop common understandings.

In summary, the four really important principles upon which any good textbook in American literature should be based are: *variety, balance, continuity of thought, and pertinency of purpose*. Of course, the textbook should be attractive in physical appearance. There should be some use made of color. The illustrations should be numerous, attention compelling, and informative. Maps, charts, diagrams, graphs, and similar pictorial representations should be included as needed. The size of the textbook should not be so great as to be awkward to handle nor should the weight, either actual or apparent, be excessive. The print should be clear and large enough to be read with less than 20-20 vision in the typical somewhat dreary and dark classrooms of America. These are minor considerations, perhaps, but not to be overlooked or neglected entirely in our search for the much-needed textbook in American literature that focuses attention upon basic American ideals and ideas rather than upon a list of famous American writers.



# The English That Adults Need

By MARJORIE HINTON BROWN

University of Illinois '48

All people need a communication tool. Our language is English, of which a few people need complete knowledge, some people need a good knowledge, and most people need a functional knowledge. G. H. Phelps defines the functional knowledge in this statement:

The teacher's task is to give his pupils a command of the instruments for the understanding and expression of the truth.<sup>1</sup>

In order that we shall be properly "motivated" to learn what specific skills are implied, we should first learn why this command is the teacher's first task.

Let me first of all point to the fact that language is our basic means of being human; that words are a part of our tissues; and that our life as a democratic society is dependent upon understandings which must be wrought through language.<sup>2</sup>

A democracy rests upon an enlightened citizenry. Ignorance and fear destroy democracy; knowledge and confidence build it up. Enlightenment is dependent upon education, the transmission of culture, arts, and skills from one generation to the next. The medium of this transmission, the vehicle of education, is language.

A democracy rests upon understanding. Knowledge is not enough—a nation may be rich in technical experts and fall a slave to its own tools. Communication is not enough—for communication can be perverted and become the instrument of evil. But understanding—a common understanding of national ideas, national purposes, and national goals—put into continuous, free, individual action is the assurance of continued democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Without language honestly used civilization cannot stand. Language . . . is a symbol, an institution which we use to represent experience but which also affects us, becomes our experience.<sup>4</sup>

We have as a people a civilized tradition to receive and defend. Under current conditions we shall do neither unless we soon improve our power to understand it.<sup>5</sup>

One quotation from Prosser, who begs for clear thinking and expression from his law students, is:

One might hazard the supposition that the average lawyer in the course of a lifetime does more writing than a novelist. He must draw contracts,

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<sup>1</sup> Phelps, G. H., "English in Education," *Journal of Education*, London, 76:525, Nov., 1944.

<sup>2</sup> LaBrant, Lou, "English in the American Scence," *English Journal*, 30:204, March, 1941.

<sup>3</sup> Pooley, Robt., "One People, One Language," *English Journal*, 31:118, Feb., 1942.

<sup>4</sup> LaBrant, *loc. cit.*, p. 209.

<sup>5</sup> Richards, I. A., "The English Language and Citizenship," *Journal of Education*, London, 71:11, Jan., 1939.

wills, and pleadings, write opinions, briefs, and letters and set thousands of words on paper where the most meticulous accuracy is of supreme importance, and the use of "effect" for "affect," of "except" for "accept," of "heirs" for "legatees," or of "may" for "shall," may conceivably bankrupt a client. He must use that double-edged tool, the English language, with all the precision of any surgeon handling a scalpel.<sup>6</sup>

Those quotations answer the question "Why?" The next group of questions are "Who?" "When?" and "Where?" Statistics showed in 1944 that 83.8% of our 14-17 years of age population reached the first year of high school in 1940, that 50.6% reached the fourth year, and that only 46.9% graduated from high school in 1944.<sup>7</sup> In 1940 the United States had 72.3% of the 14-17 age group enrolled in secondary schools. Illinois then had 83%; in 1946 Dr. George Stoddard predicted at the Joint Convention of the Illinois Association of School Administrators that in a decade or two Illinois will have at least 90% of that group in school, with 80% graduating. That is in the future. Our problem is primarily in the present. If almost half of our youth are out of formal education's clutches—or loving hands, depending upon the school system—by the end of the eleventh grade, then the necessary English for effective citizenship must be taught by that time. Otherwise almost half of our population will not be able to read with any discrimination, to write an intelligible letter of application, to choose the most suitable candidate for an office or the best insurance, to read even a timetable with any degree of accuracy. Therefore, the English that adults need must be a fundamental part of the experiences in English courses and other courses up through grade eleven if the public is best to be served by the schools.

The next question is "What?" A sophomore class of the Clifford J. Scott High School in East Orange, New Jersey "felt that they needed to know how

- (1) to spell simple words,
- (2) to write a business letter,
- (3) to read timetables,
- (4) to use a telephone book,
- (5) to fill out questionnaires,
- (6) to read ballots, insurance forms, leases, and deeds,
- (7) to talk with ease in interviews or social gatherings, and
- (8) to give and receive directions."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Prosser, Wm. L., "English as She is Wrote," *English Journal*, 28:40, Jan., 1939.

<sup>7</sup> U. S. Office of Education, *Statistical Summary of Education 1943-44*, chapter one, table 27, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Beachner, Anna, "Functional English," *English Journal*, 33:385, Sept., 1944.

Certainly this list is incomplete, but it does offer a beginning. Those students realized that there were certain skills which would be useful to them and which they should learn. In a course in grammar for people who were going into business careers, Elizabeth Frank's students found that

The object of a course in grammar was to improve their ability to write and to speak readily the kind of good English that is demanded in modern business, the English they were going to use.<sup>9</sup>

A more nearly complete list of values which should be gained for everyone from English was given by Adrienne Reeve in "Why Teach English?" She and a class agreed on this outline:

- I. Objectives of English: intelligent reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking.
- II. Needs fulfilled in English classes:
  - A. Economic
    1. Communication skills necessary to self-support
      - (a) Acquaintance with reading materials relative to one's trade, business, or profession
      - (b) Familiarity with application forms, contracts, insurance policies, tax reports, *etc.*
      - (c) Giving and following directions, both oral and written
      - (d) Acquaintance with business letters, order forms, *etc.*
      - (e) Practice in interviews, telephone technique, business etiquette
  - B. Social
    1. Socially acceptable speech and writing
    2. Background of reading and culture
    3. Understanding of social relationships through reading, clubs, and other social experiences such as trips to museums, theaters, and radio broadcasts with the class
    4. Acquaintance with correct parliamentary procedure
    5. Development of leisure-time pursuits, such as participation and appreciation of radio, drama, movies, books, magazines, newspapers, discussions of all kinds
  - C. Civic
    1. Development of skills and understandings necessary to good citizenship
      - (a) Intelligent reading of current periodicals and literature
      - (b) Intelligent listening to speeches, radio, discussions
      - (c) Intelligent criticism of books, films, drama
      - (d) Ability to detect propaganda and advertising traps<sup>10</sup>

Under economic needs were listed communication skills necessary to self-support. Can you imagine a B-29 navigator who could

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<sup>9</sup> Frank, Elizabeth, "Bread and Butter Grammar," *English Journal*, 27:853, Dec., 1938.

<sup>10</sup> Reeve, Adrienne W., "Why Teach English?" *English Journal*, 34:377, Sept., 1945.



not read his charts or a telegrapher who could receive code rapidly but could not write it down for delivery? Can you imagine how much easier it would be, if proper training had been given, to file income tax reports or fill out study lists for university registrations? Elbert Hubbard said, "The world cries out for . . . the man who can Carry a Message to Garcia."<sup>11</sup> If people were taught how to follow directions, perhaps the world would not have to cry so loudly. Any candidate for a job will tell you, either from his nervousness, from failure to land other jobs, or from success, that ability to communicate in interviews and a knowledge of business etiquette are important.

Under social needs are a large number of skills. Everyone realizes the need for socially acceptable speech and writing. Woe unto the poor girl who says, "They was," at a socially important moment. Disaster to the person who writes: "I am not able to show up for the wedding since we haven't got a car—so I am writing to you to send our regrets," or "Deer Jim, So glad you gradiated from high school. We at home is proud of you." How important is the third group, the understanding of social relationships!

. . . our students need to learn from literature to understand their own world, the world of this America. . . . The especial responsibility of teachers of English seems to me to open to our students as many avenues as possible through which they will, first of all, understand the daily lives, the difficulties, the emotions, and the ambitions, the human qualities of their neighbors in America.<sup>12</sup>

Recreation pursuits need to be developed wisely. If our leisure-time activities actually re-create, then we should be careful that we tumble out of the mold better than we were when we went in. Racy books, pulp magazines, low quality radio programs and books, and unintelligent reading in newspapers of the comics or the society column only or the financial columns exclusively—these lead to one-sided, poor development of personalities.

Under civic needs come the most important skills involving not only good citizenship but also, conceivably, life itself. Many people have been seriously concerned with communications, particularly with words at war:

As never before, "the tyranny of print" in the modern world demands a training in discrimination if readers are to find their way through the jungle of the printed word. If democracy lives by the freedom of the press, it will

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<sup>11</sup> Hubbard, Elbert, "A Message to Garcia," in *The Social Revolt*, by Oscar Cargill, pp. 330-332.

<sup>12</sup> LaBrant, *loc. cit.*, p. 208.

ultimately survive only through some power of popular discrimination in judging what the press produces.<sup>13</sup>

Basic to the success of fascism has been an insane . . . use of language. . . . Through perversion of the functions of words, through disregard of the sacredness of speech, fascism has built up a world in which treaties, promises, and even reports of daily events are treated as trivia, means to any ends.<sup>14</sup>

Nowhere else in the world can one find such an enormous geographical territory or so vast a population united in one common tongue. And in speaking of a common tongue I do not mean only the language of the cultured, educated minority. I mean that the humblest citizens of Bangor, Pullman, San Diego, and Tallahassee could meet in St. Louis and there converse with one another and with residents of Missouri without perceptible barriers to complete communication. This fact is not only an achievement of such magnitude as to be scarcely grasped, so accustomed to it are we; it is, indeed, a defense second to none against the malignant forces in the world today which are openly striving to rend us apart as a people, to set us against each other by creating artificial lines of race, culture, or region.<sup>15</sup>

We are a fluent nation—we talk a great deal and we listen a great deal. Cheap facility in speech is often mistaken for profound thinking; the constant dinning in our ears of arguments for or against this and that makes us either indifferent to argument, which is dangerous to a democracy, or weakly gullible to all argument, which is even more dangerous. Today the radio and the talking-pictures, in addition to the newspaper and the magazine, are potential weapons of attack upon our national life, through our language—weapons so easily perverted to wrong uses as to frighten every thinking citizen.<sup>16</sup>

More humorous is the example of "Scotty" Briggs who, as his civic responsibility, went to see the minister about conducting Buck Fanshaws' funeral.

He choked, and even shed tears; but with an effort he mastered his voice and said in lugubrious tones:

"Are you the duck that runs the gospel-mill next door?"

"Am I the—pardon me, I believe I do not understand?"

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"You ruther hold over me, pard. I reckon I can't call that hand. Ante and pass the buck."

"How? I beg pardon. What did I understand you to say?"

"Well, you've ruther got the bulge on me. Or maybe we've both got the bulge somehow. You don't smoke me and I don't smoke you. You see, one of the boys has passed in his checks and we want to give him a good send-off, and so the thing I'm on now is to roust out somebody to jerk a little chin-music for us and waltz him through handsome."

"My friend, I seem to grow more and more bewildered. Your observations are wholly incomprehensible to me. Cannot you simplify them in some

<sup>13</sup> Adams, J. Donald, *New York Times*, January 7, 1945, as quoted in Reeve, *loc. cit.*, p. 378.

<sup>14</sup> LaBrant, *loc. cit.*, p. 205.

<sup>15</sup> Pooley, *loc. cit.*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>16</sup> Pooley, *loc. cit.*, p. 116.

way? At first I thought perhaps I understood you, but I grope now. Would it not expedite matters if you restricted yourself to categorical statements of fact unencumbered with obstructing accumulations of metaphor and allegory?"<sup>17</sup>

Both of them need our English course!

The English that adults need is the English that will give them "a command of the instruments for the understanding and expression of the truth."<sup>18</sup> If that basic tool is not taught, we may repeat to the adults who are ineffective citizens and to ourselves as a social unit "the cry of the late Henry van Dyke to the little boy who did not like to read: 'Poor child! Who crippled thee?'"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Clemens, Samuel, *Roughing It*, as quoted in *The Rise of Realism* by Wann, pp. 416-417.

<sup>18</sup> Phelps, *loc. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Prosser, *loc. cit.*, p. 40.





